

THE
TEXTILE
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VOLUMES 38 AND 39

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JOAN TEER JACOBSON

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2320 S STREET NW WASHINGTON DC 20008-4088
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Marion Stirling Pugh (1911-2001)



Marion Stirling in 1939 at the camp of Tres Zapotes, Veracruz where the Stirlings found the first of the great Olmec heads. Photo by Richard Hewitt Stewart.

The Textile Museum has lost a Trustee who shaped the direction of the Museum for over thirty years and who was the last direct link to the Museum's founder, George Hewitt Myers. Profoundly interested in the art and history of weaving, Marion Pugh was a Trustee of The Textile Museum from 1968, serving as Secretary, Treasurer, Vice President, and President.

Marion was just shy of her 90th birthday when she died in Tucson after an extraordinarily productive life that saw continuing accomplishment in a variety of scholarly disciplines ranging from archaeology to geography.

She was born Marion Illig on May 12, 1911, in Middletown, New York, the daughter of Louis and Lena Randall Illig. In 1930, Marion received her BS degree from Rider College, and afterward moved to Washington, DC, where she attended George Washington University from 1931 to 1933. During this time Marion also worked at the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology as secretary to Matthew W. Stirling, Director of the Bureau. On December 11, 1933, Marion and Matthew were married.

Together the Stirlings shared a career of archaeological adventure and discovery, beginning with a series of joint National Geographic Society-Smithsonian Institution expeditions to explore the little-known ruins of Mexico's Gulf Coast regions between 1938 and 1946. These journeys by Marion, Matthew, and National Geographic photographer Richard Hewitt Stewart took place mainly by boat and horseback through the humid rain forests of Veracruz and Tabasco states. Despite the physical difficulties, the expeditions proved successful beyond all expectations, for they revealed and recorded a truly lost civilization—the Olmec, producers of the famed colossal heads of stone and other remains, dated to around the beginning of the first millennium B.C., that proved it to be one of the earliest high cultures in all of the Americas.

From the Mexican work the Stirlings and Stewart moved on to other areas of the hemisphere, including Ecuador, Panama, and Costa Rica. The results of these expeditions appeared regularly as articles by Marion, Matthew, or both in the *National Geographic Magazine*, *Américas*, and other journals. In 1941, Marion shared with Matthew the prestigious Franklin L. Burr Award of the National Geographic Society.

Marion's ever-broadening interests are reflected in her memberships in the Association of American Geographers and the Society of Woman Geographers, where she served on the Executive Council in 1954, and as President, 1960-63 and 1969-72.

Matthew Stirling died in 1975. One of Marion's prized possessions was a silver pendant that Matthew had made for her in Mexico, embossed with a jaguar mask on the obverse and the date of a stele whose date she decoded on the reverse.

In 1979 Marion married Major General John Ramsey Pugh, the son-in-law of George Hewitt Myers, who was active himself in the work of The Textile Museum. Together they made their home at Little Fiddlers Green, General Pugh's family estate in Round Hill, Virginia. They updated this stone house dating from 1770 to pursue their interests, building a library for their books and memorabilia, and a lap swimming pool.

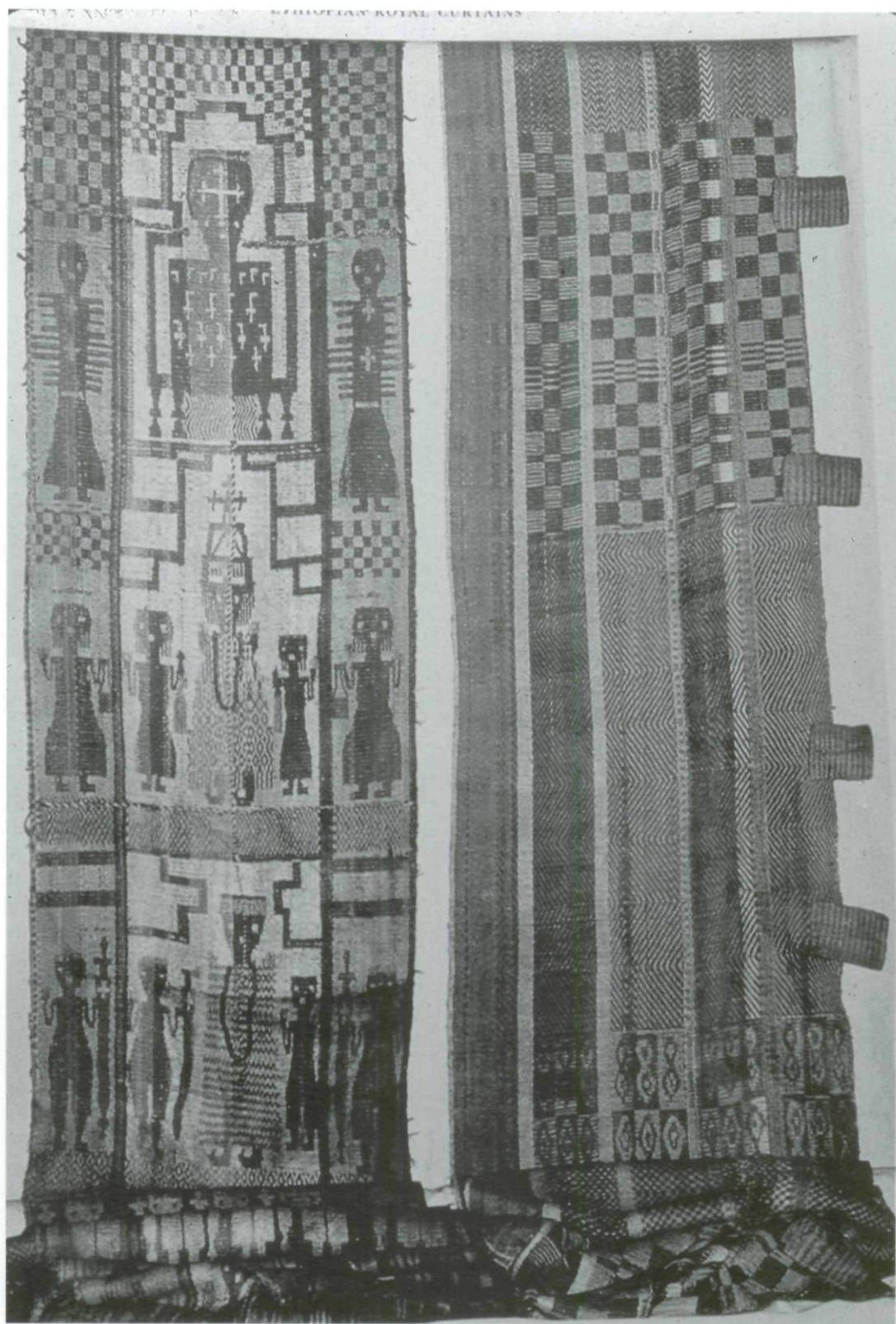
Marion's interest in Mexican textiles led her to establish the Mexican Research Fund at The Textile Museum for the purchase of textiles for the collection. She both contributed to this fund and also asked that gifts in expression of sympathy on the death of Matthew Stirling be made to it. In 1979, General and Mrs. Pugh broadened the scope of the fund and it was accordingly renamed the Latin American Research Fund. Marion endowed this fund in December 1993. The fund has been the Museum's only source of purchase funds for textiles in this area, making possible many significant additions to the collections from Guatemala, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia as well as Mexico. Purchases have been made of material collected in the field in the course of textile research in each of these countries and outstanding examples offered by dealers. Marion also supported other Western Hemisphere Department projects such as fieldwork by curator Ann Rowe in Ecuador, and a forthcoming publication on Q'ero textiles from the Cuzco area of Peru.

Art and adventure were Marion's pursuits. We do well to follow in her footsteps.

Ursula E. McCracken
Director, The Textile Museum

George E. Stuart
Center for Maya Research

Fig. 1. Sections of two Ethiopian hangings from Magdala (left panel = BM1 (1868.10-1.22); right panel = BM2 (1973 Af38.1)). Silk, tablet-woven. BM1: 504 x 60 cm., BM2: 491 x 50 cm. British Museum, London. As published in *The Burlington Magazine*, June 1996. Photography by Michael Gervers.



Tablet-woven Curtains from Ethiopia: New Light on a Puzzling Group of Textiles

Martha Henze

The largest examples of tablet-woven textiles known came to light as the result of a dramatic military confrontation led by the British under Sir Robert Napier that took place April 13, 1868, at Magdala on the high plateau of north-central Ethiopia.¹ In the aftermath of the battle, which ended with the suicide of the flamboyant Emperor Tewodros II, the treasures he had looted from numerous churches and monasteries in his kingdom were salvaged from his ruined fortress. Richard R. Holmes, a member of The British Museum's Department of Manuscripts, had come with the expedition and had been provided with 1,000 English pounds to purchase valuable objects of special interest to the museum. Of objects auctioned to the British officers present for the benefit of noncommissioned officers and soldiers, Mr. Holmes acquired 350 Ethiopian Church manuscripts and other valuable objects. Among these was a single panel of an unusually large curtain woven of thick, colored silk yarn in a technique later recognized as tablet weaving.²

This unusual panel remains in the Ethnography Department of The British Museum (1868.10-1.22, hereafter referred to as BM1). In later years objects from Magdala such as crosses, censers, chalices, curtains, and other ecclesiastical objects have appeared in museums and English churches, but many may remain in private hands. Few heavy silken tablet-woven curtains were taken at Magdala. Many officers probably thought the heavy curtains were unsuitable for personal use and probably not worth the enormous effort to carry them home to England. The royal class were the only people in Ethiopia who could use objects of silk and the only ones wealthy enough to buy raw silk. There appears to have been only one workshop in which these curtains were manufactured. By the end of the eighteenth century, the technique declined and seems to have disappeared. Two other curtains

(besides BM1) have surfaced to date. One panel was acquired by The British Museum in 1973 (1973 Af38.1, hereafter referred to as BM2) from a descendant of an officer at Magdala. A third silken curtain, made up of three panels, was donated to the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM) in Toronto by the son of a British officer, present at Magdala, who had emigrated to Canada in the late nineteenth century (ROM 922.26.1).

No scholarly attention was paid to these curtains until the early 1990s when Dr. Michael Gervers set in motion a thorough study of all three of these extraordinary curtains in collaboration with Dr. Ewa Balicka-Witakowska.³ Except for an undocumented sighting in Ethiopia in the 1960s,⁴ these museum objects were for many years the only known examples of this textile rarity. While it seemed clear that all three had been taken from Ethiopia at the same time, there were no clues to the identity of their weavers. Although the curtains appeared to be of an ecclesiastical nature, there was no firsthand evidence to explain how or where they were made or used. Colonel G. A. Sweny, who acquired the curtain now in the ROM, was told that his curtain came from a church in Gondar, the royal capital of Ethiopia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Neither silk weaving nor tablet weaving is known to have been part of the traditional culture in Ethiopia at any period up to the present.⁵

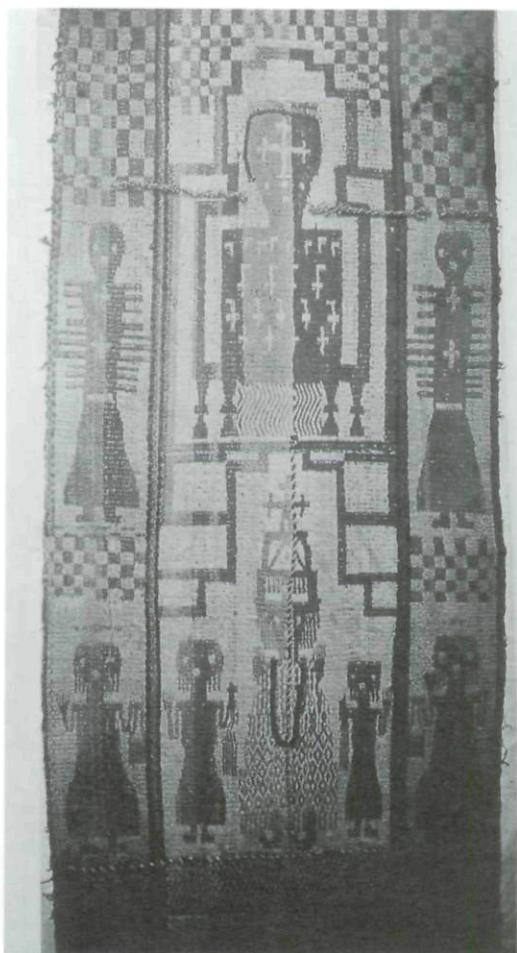
New evidence came to light in February 1995 when Paul B. Henze, a retired American Foreign Service officer and historian of Ethiopia, was shown a hanging of three panels of silken curtains much like the London and Toronto museum objects while he was photographing manuscripts and icons at a monastery church in northern Ethiopia.⁶ He and I discovered three additional examples of similar tablet-woven curtains, of cotton rather than silk, during two research trips to Ethiopia in 1998 and 1999. The purpose of this paper is to summarize the information published by Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers (1996) and to report the results of our field research to date.

Silk Tablet-woven Curtains from Magdala

The figured panel in The British Museum

The single panel (BM1; fig. 1, left) selected for the British Museum by Richard R. Holmes at Magdala measures 504 cm in length and varies in width between 54 and 62 cm (almost 17 x 2 feet). The panel required the use of 349 tablets with 4 warp yarns per tablet.⁷ Its length is divided visually into three parts, each with designs rendered in red against a white or yellow ground. Thin blue stripes set off the central section from the others. The panel appears to have been the central panel of three; remnants of connecting threads can be seen on the selvedges. The central and widest section of the panel used a bleached white thread as background which causes the red figures and patterning to stand out more clearly than those on the narrower side sections where yellow is used.

Fig. 2. Detail of BM1 (fig. 1) showing two royal figures. As published in *The Burlington Magazine*, June 1996. Photography by Michael Gervers.



Decoration on the BM1 panel is a composition of figural scenes bordered at top and bottom by geometric patterning of various kinds. The most prominent figures⁸ of the white-grounded section are arranged in three registers and, judging from their attributes of crowns, patterned apparel, and attendants, the three persons represented appear to be of royal stature (figs. 1, 2). Three lower registers depict rows of warriors. In the first row of five figures, each is armed with a curved sword at his waist and holds a tall staff cross; in the second row, four warriors carry round shields, wear an animal-skin over the shoulder, and hold two sheathed spears; five warriors in the third row are outfitted with curved swords, cartridge belts and matchlock guns.

The nonfigural panel in The British Museum

The single panel (BM2; fig. 1, right) donated to The British Museum by a descendant of a Magdala officer in 1973 is nonfigural and measures 491 cm in length and varies between 48 and 56 cm in width. The panel required the use of 290 tablets with 4 warp yarns per tablet. Ten tablet-woven loops have been sewn at fairly regular intervals along one long edge indicating that the curtain was hung with the stripes viewed horizontally at some point in its history. As the ROM curtain and others discovered recently were clearly made to be viewed vertically, suspended by loops sewn along the narrow top end, it seems probable that BM2 was originally made to hang that way also. Some of the loops now sewn to the long edge of BM2 may have been borrowed from another panel of the same type and used together with those woven for BM2's narrow end. The panel, shown in vertical position in figure 1, consists of five narrow bands of geometric ornamentation using red and yellow yarn with a narrow stripe of pale indigo blue color separating them. The bands are made up of larger sections of the same geometric patterns used as infill ornamentation in BM1.⁹

The three-paneled curtain in the Royal Ontario Museum

In physical appearance the ROM curtain (ROM 922.26.1; fig. 3) very closely resembles the British Museum objects. It measures 535 cm x 212 cm, each of the three vertical panels being approximately 70 cm wide (a little wider than the two panels in The British Museum). Each panel

required the use of over 350 tablets using more than 1,400 twisted silk threads. The panels are woven of very thick blue, yellow, red, and bleached white spun-silk yarn in the same tablet weaving techniques as used in the British Museum examples. The ornamentation of each panel is arranged in a series of registers that alternate geometric patterns and figural elements. Some of the latter are human figures, while others are ecclesiastical objects sometimes similar in type to those in BM1. The central panel here is the most important; in its detail of a crowned queen and enthroned king it appears to have been influenced by, or to be related in some way to, the BM1 panel. Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers (1996, p. 380) suggest that the ROM hanging may have been woven in a Gondar workshop somewhat later than BM1 but may represent the same royal personages. The rendering of some figures in the ROM panel is less precise and the spatial arrangement less carefully measured than in BM1, indicating a possible decline in workmanship. The assemblage of three processional crosses and censers in the lower left side panel may be seen as a symbolic representation of the Crucifixion, together with the darkened sun and the moon shown as green and red rectangles. The opposing side panel very clearly depicts the Crucifixion, with human figures instead of crosses. These two figural assemblages, together with the ceremony depicted in the upper right panel, reinforce the religious character of the scenes on this curtain. The authors interpret the scenes as depicting the celebration of a mass attended by royal patrons, rather than a court scene as in BM1.

Because of the images on BM1 and the ROM triptych, and the very expensive materials of which they are made, it seems reasonable to conclude that the "Gondar" curtains from Magdala were woven under royal patronage in the second quarter of the eighteenth century. BM2 is probably a side panel from a similar curtain.

The Abba Gerima Silk Curtains

On February 21, 1995, Paul Henze visited the ancient monastery of Abba Gerima located a few miles south of the town of Adwa in the province of Tigray (fig. 4). To his amazement, among the heap of dusty carpets pulled out of a corner of the treasury for his examination were long panels of colorful silk. These resembled those he had first seen when Michael Gervers presented a paper about the ROM curtain at the Second

International Conference on the History of Ethiopian Art in Nieborow, Poland, in 1990. What he had found were two more examples of the tablet-woven "Gondar"-type curtains now in The British Museum and in the Royal Ontario Museum.

The two Abba Gerima curtains measure 375 cm in length; each is made up of three panels 66 cm wide (figs. 5, 6). One curtain (AG1, fig. 5) has no figural panels but is made up entirely of geometric patterning—wavy lines, zigzags, concentric diamonds, checkerboard blocks, solid blocks of color and stripes—worked in the same clear blue, red, green, and yellow heavy silk as the museum objects (AG1 most closely resembles

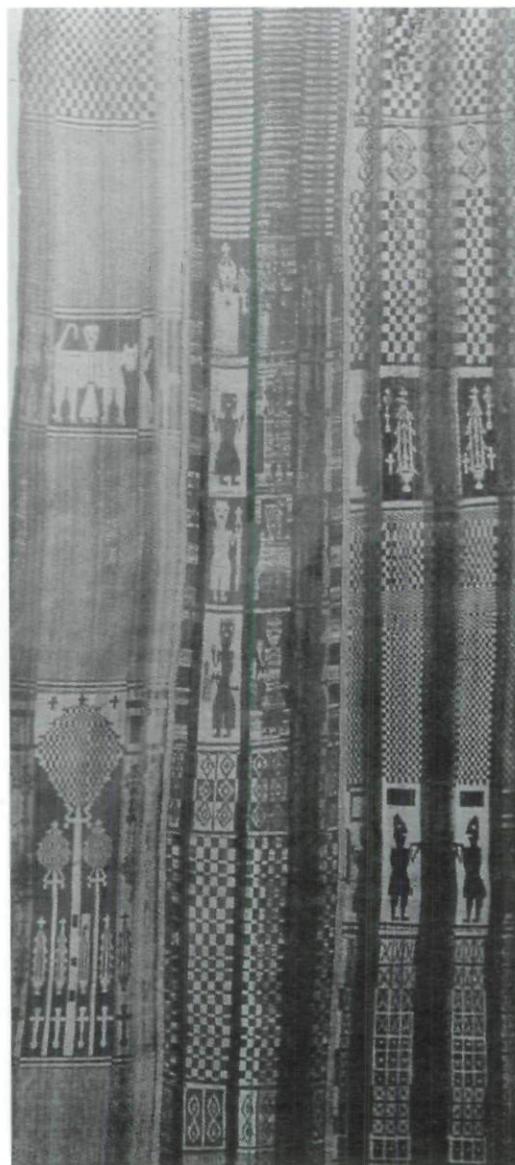


Fig. 3. Section of the Royal Ontario Museum silk curtain. As published in *The Burlington Magazine*, June 1996. ROM 922.26.1, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto.

the BM2 panel). The second hanging (AG2, figs. 6–8) has a central panel with two rows of five cross-in-diamond patterns and two rows of five ecclesiastics wearing neck crosses, holding in one hand a cross and in the other a prayer stick (fig. 7). Figures are shown across the width in a color pattern of red on what appears to be undyed silk, blue on red, red on yellow, again blue on red, and finally greenish or faded blue on what appears to be bleached white. The remainder of the central panel bears the same general geometric patterning that covers the two side panels which are without figures. In brief, they are visually of the same group as the so-called Gondar pieces.¹⁰

The Abba Gerima monks were delighted to relate what they knew about the curtains, which they said had been given to the monastery in the reign of Ras Mikael Sehul who lived from c. 1686 to 1780. An aggressive Tigrayan ruler, he used his strength to ally himself with the more prestigious Gondarene royalty. Ras Mikael played matrimonial politics as well, marrying when already in

his seventies a daughter of Mentewab (empress 1721–30 and regent 1730–69).¹¹ After a brief period of meddlesome attempts at king-making, he was defeated by rival figures and, losing all influence, was forced to return to his home province to spend his declining years. He died there at a ripe old age (Prouty and Rosenfeld 1994, pp. 231–232). It is tempting to speculate that this wily old ruler who associated himself with the Gondar court during the period in question might have seen the silken curtains hanging in one of the royal churches, come to covet the luxurious objects, and managed to bring a set back to his home area to give to his favorite religious establishment, the monastery of Abba Gerima. At the very least, Ras Mikael Sehul provides a tangible connection between Gondar and Abba Gerima and could lend weight to the hypothesis that the Magdala curtains were from the royal court at Gondar.

The interview at Abba Gerima in 1995 demonstrates the nature of research in areas such as this where history is largely kept in the memory and passed on orally. The monks of

Fig. 4. Treasury building of the Abba Gerima monastery in the northern Ethiopian province of Tigray, where the two silk hangings (AG1 and AG2) were laid out for observation and photographing in 1995.

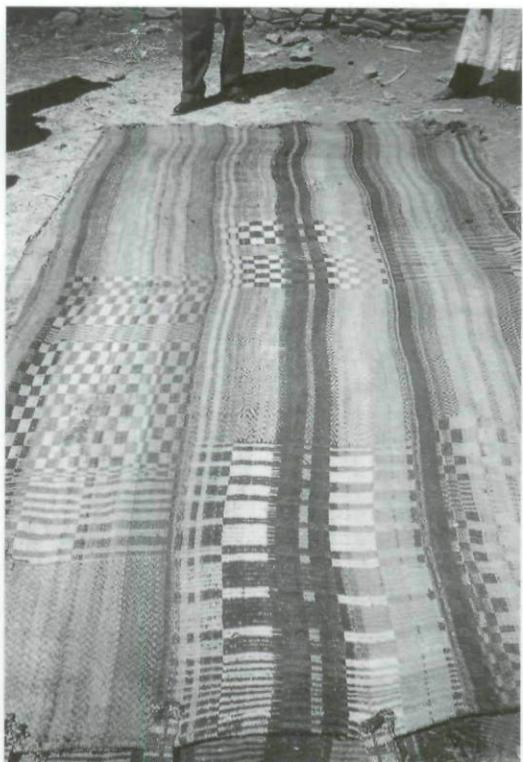
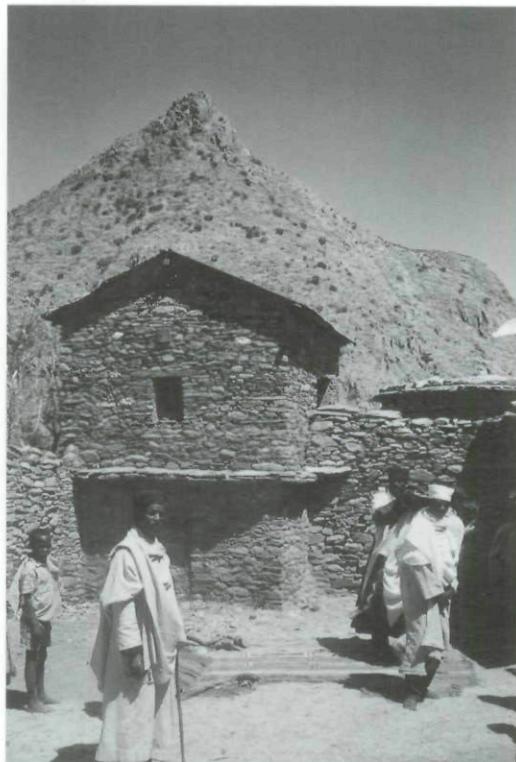


Fig. 5. Full-length view of the nonfigural three-paneled silk curtain (AG1) found in the Abba Gerima monastery.

Abba Gerima told Paul Henze that the curtains had hung for many years in the sanctuary. Loops of blue and yellow tablet-woven fabric are sewn at intervals on the folded-over top edge. A simple pole of hard wood would have been attached between two pillars of the church to hold the curtains, as the modern curtains are hung today. The monks said that they were not using them any longer because the weight of the silk made them too hard to draw easily. When asked where the curtains were made and by whom, the monks replied that they were woven near Adwa by a people called "Seglin" (phonetic spelling) who were not Ethiopian and came from somewhere else. Asked if these people were Muslim and what language they spoke, they said they did not know. They thought the people had lived in a village south of Adwa called Mai Zbi (Hyena Water), but there was none there now.¹² Efforts to find traces of a group of foreign artisans bearing the name "Seglin" working in this region in the middle of the eighteenth century have not yet borne fruit.

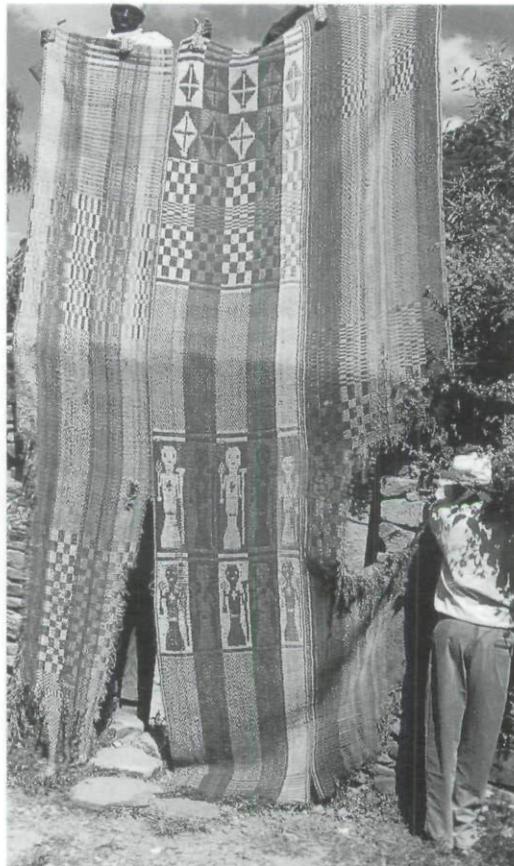


Fig. 6. Full-length view of silk curtain with two registers of figures (AG2, reverse) found in the Abba Gerima monastery.



Fig. 7. Detail of section of AG2 depicting two rows of Ethiopian religious figures, each holding a cross in the right hand and a prayer staff in the left.

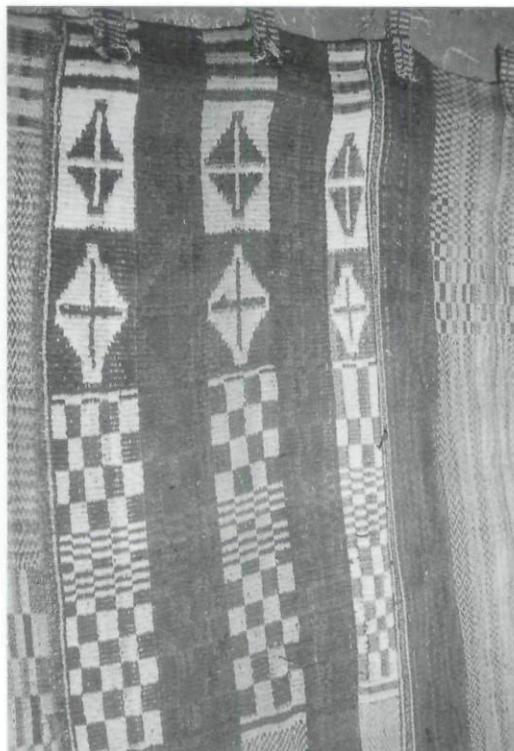


Fig. 8. Detail of AG2: cross-in-diamond patterning in central panel.

Analyses of Dyes

The three-paneled curtain in the ROM underwent a thorough structural analysis by Mary Frame, an independent textile scholar who resides in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, prior to its conservation and dye analysis by the Canadian Conservation Institute (CCI) in Ottawa (Frame, 1993). The dyes of the ROM hanging were analyzed by that laboratory in 1993 and 1994 (Moffatt and Miller, 1993; 1994). Peter Collingwood was commissioned to undertake a study of the structure of the two hangings in the British Museum (BM1 and BM2) and completed the work in early 1999.¹³ The CCI was recently commissioned to analyze dyes contained in yarn from the Abba Gerima silk curtain AG1. The tests identified dyes on fibers of the Abba Gerima sample that have the same chemical compositions as those obtained from the ROM "Gondar" hanging. The dyes identified were madder, indigo, brazilwood, and a plant of the *Rhamnus* genus. The report concludes: "It cannot be determined from the analytical results whether the dyed silk from the various artifacts came from the same workshop or time period" (Moffatt and Miller 1999).

These dyestuffs were surely available in an important commercial center such as Gondar in the eighteenth century. It is likely that the silk yarn was either dyed abroad before export or was dyed in Ethiopia with imported or local dyes. Although scientific analyzes to date have not answered all the questions surrounding these eleven panels of tablet-woven silk, which have so many visual elements in common, they have confirmed that the panels were made from the same material and in the same technique. Furthermore, a field interview indicates that the panels were almost certainly hung between pillars to conceal the *maqdas*, the most sacred part, of the churches for which they were made. The interview at Abba Gerima offered a small clue to the identity of the weavers and a possible location of production.

More Ethiopian Tablet-woven Church Curtains

The cotton curtains in the church of St. Gabriel Wukien

In February 1998, Paul Henze and I traveled in the state of Tigray to a region called the Tembien (fig. 9), which lies northeast of the Semien Mountains between Gondar and Adwa. Our goal was to visit some of the rock-cut churches which had just been made accessible by new roads. Not visible from the valley below, the large monastic church of St. Gabriel Wukien lies about 30 meters up a cliffside of red volcanic stone and has magnificent views across the broad valley to the rugged bulk of Worqamba (Mountain of Gold), whose slopes conceal several other rock-cut churches.

The St. Gabriel Wukien church was hewn according to a basilical plan with columns, arches, and domes between four bays—a fine example of the dozens of churches carved into living rock in the heartland of Ethiopia.¹⁴

As we walked through the ambulatory carved around three sides of the church and stepped over the threshold to enter, we were stunned by an unexpected reward for our climb. Peering through the late afternoon gloom into the unlit nave, we were able to make out a wall of curtains stretched between columns across the far end concealing the holy-of-holies, or *maqdas*. Even from a distance of about 12 meters, we could make out through the dust-filled air the figures of priests with crosses and soldiers with weapons with which we were familiar from the ROM and BM silk hangings (figs. 10–13).

It was clear to us at the outset that the curtains hanging in St. Gabriel Wukien, though woven in the same technique and similar in decoration and size to the silken "Gondar" and Abba Gerima pieces, were woven of cotton yarn by artisans of far less skill. The most exciting aspect of the discovery is that these were the first examples of this unusual type of textile found *in situ*.

Three complete curtains were hung side by side from a wooden pole or, in two cases, from a thick cord strung between the stone pillars across the nave. They were suspended by loops of leather or fabric roughly sewn across the panels at points of stress. One tablet-woven loop remained; this appears to have been the original mode of hanging. All other loops had been

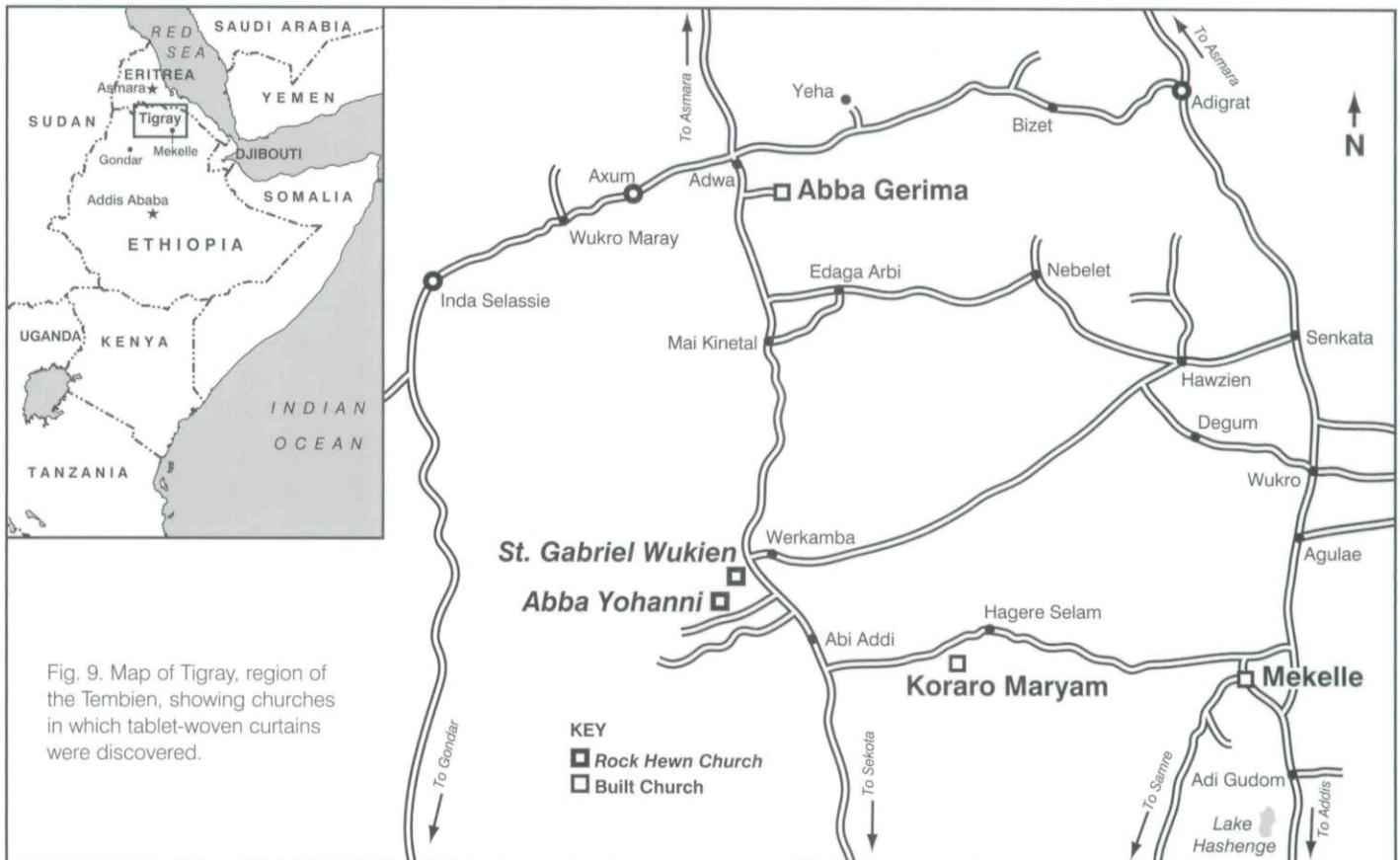


Fig. 9. Map of Tigray, region of the Tembien, showing churches in which tablet-woven curtains were discovered.

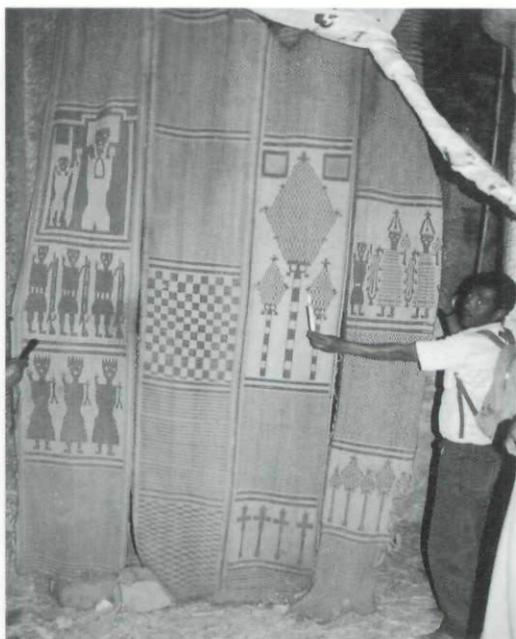


Fig. 10. First view of cotton tablet-woven curtain of four panels (GW1) hanging *in situ* in the rock-hewn church of St. Gabriel Wukien in the Tembien region of Tigray. Note that illumination is provided only by candles or flashlight in this fifteenth-century church.

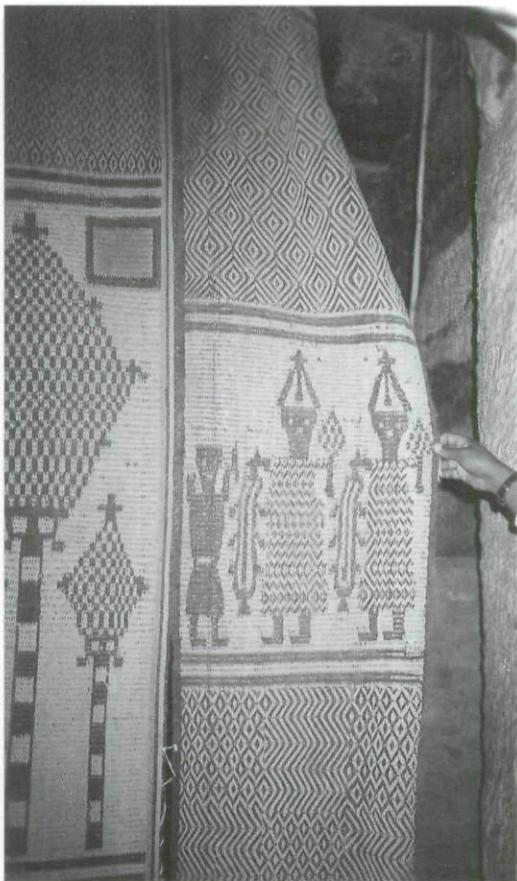


Fig. 11. Section of GW1 curtain showing the religious figures, soldiers, and crosses that relate these cotton tablet-woven curtains to the silken "Gondar" curtains in the Royal Ontario Museum and The British Museum. One clearly sees the representation of the Crucifixion in the third panel: there are the three crosses and colored squares that represent the darkened sun and the moon.

Fig. 12. Detail of GW1: double-faced complementary-warp structure.



Fig. 13. Detail of GW1: geometric patterning of the fourth panel in the dress of the two priests.



replaced at least once during the years of use, evidence of the burdensome weight of such curtains, which caused the monks of Abba Gerima to put aside their silken ones. The bottom edges of all panels showed signs of having been worn or trimmed from time to time, no doubt because the fabric's weight caused them to sag onto the straw-covered stone floor. The pervasive dust of a century or two surely added to their weight. At some point in recent years a flowered polyester curtain had been stretched on a nylon cord in front of the old tablet-woven hangings.¹⁵

Two of the St. Gabriel Wukien curtains (GW1 and GW2) are made up of four narrow panels each, approximately 370 cm long and 46 cm wide. The third curtain (GW3) is of similar length and comprises three panels with geometric patterning only. The left-hand panel of GW1 (figs. 10–13) has three registers of figures at eye level with a block of concentric diamond design above and a block of chevron patterning below. Uppermost (fig. 12) is a poorly drawn architectural element framing two white-robed figures, one a priest bearing on his head what appears to be a *tabot*, the holy tablet sanctifying the church; the second is a smaller figure bearing a staff-cross as large as himself. Both figures stand in a frame which may represent the entrance of the *maqqas*. The register below shows three warriors wearing cartridge belts and holding matchlock guns like those in BM1. A third register has three figures with spiky headdresses; each holds in the left hand what is probably meant to represent a fly whisk (figs. 10, 11).

The second figural panel of GW1 has an assemblage made up of a large diamond-shaped processional cross flanked by two smaller crosses, all of interwoven design (figs. 10, 11).¹⁶ The appearance of a square form at either side of the uppermost point of the large cross recalls the interpretation by Balicka-Witakowska of a similar assemblage on the lower left panel of the ROM curtain as symbolic of the Crucifixion with the sun and the moon (Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers 1996, pp. 380, 383). This entire panel, which bears a lower range depicting four hand-crosses, is especially well-drawn as if showing that the artisan was weaving the shape of objects entirely familiar to him.

The last figural panel of GW1 includes a register depicting two elegantly robed priests wearing ecclesiastical crowns, holding pierced diamond-shaped hand-crosses in one hand and elaborate censers in the other (figs. 10, 13). A small dark hatless figure fills the width;

perhaps there was no space for a third priest as in the first register of the ROM's central panel. In a low register, two large diamond-shaped hand-crosses alternate with three smaller ones (fig. 10).

The second four-panel curtain at St. Gabriel Wukien (GW2) includes two panels completely filled with registers of various geometric patterning, like those used as infill on figural panels of the curtains at the Abba Gerima monastery church and the Gondarene ones now in the ROM and BM. These at St. Gabriel Wukien are rendered in shades of dyed brown and cream-colored natural cotton.

Only one register of figures decorates the left-hand central panel of GW2 (fig. 14). In it, two crowned priests hold censers in their left hands and tall processional crosses of a rounded form topped by a small cross in their right. The third figure wears no crown, but his staff seems to hold a crown aloft. A well-drawn hand cross floats above his head (fig. 15, left).

The right-hand central panel of GW2 (figs. 14-17) contains several puzzling elements. At the upper edge of the panel are two figures that could rarely have been seen from the floor below (fig. 15). They are grotesque, apparently six-armed elongated figures dressed only in a garment which extends below the knees. Each stands with one arm uplifted. Between the figures is what might be a piece of furniture with carved legs. Although rendered in an awkward manner, this assemblage is reminiscent of the depiction of the enthroned king and attendant "angels" in the top figural register of BM1.

Figures in the central register are quite distorted (figs. 14, right, and 16). Two small figures hold disproportionately large staff-crosses; one wears a scimitar at his belt and the other holds a fly whisk in his left hand. The central figure is represented by a huge head with spiky hair, two eyes, and a mouth, attached to a cross-topped staff taller than the other two figures. The lowest register (fig. 17) contains four spear-bearers: two tall figures bearing rectangular shields and spears with leather-shrouded spearheads, and two shorter figures holding smaller spearheads. Above them are two ewers which may depict jugs of holy water.

The third curtain at St. Gabriel Wukien (GW3) is made up of three nonfigural panels which may have lost a fourth at some time in the past (fig. 18). This curtain had been torn, patched, and shortened, and was used at the edge farthest from the sanctuary.¹⁷

During a visit to Tembien in March 1999, we revisited the church of St. Gabriel Wukien. On this visit, the head priest added a few bits of lore to our interpretation of the figures. He pointed out that the priestly figure carrying the tabot-like object on his head was Abba Daniel, founder of the monastery, who was buried in the church.¹⁸

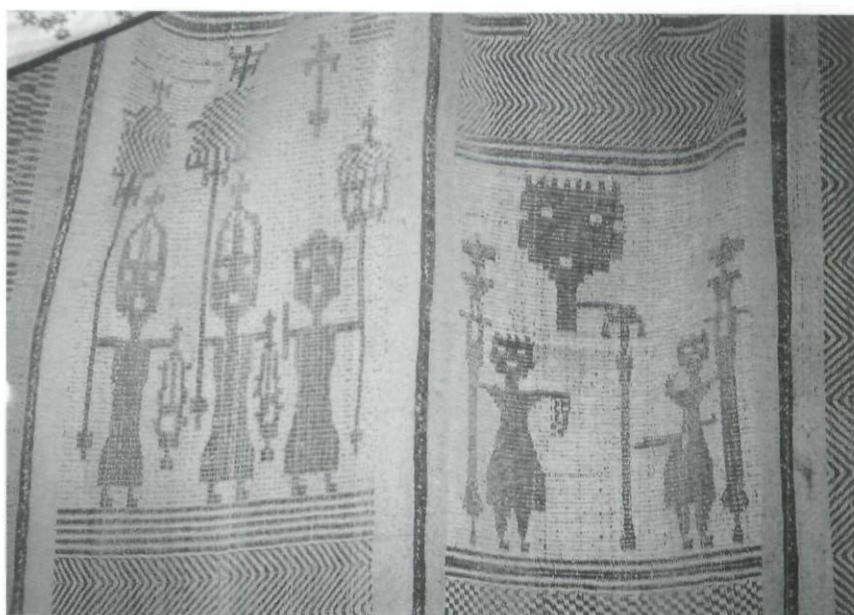


Fig. 14. Section of adjacent registers of two panels of GW2. These figures reveal the inexperience of the weavers who appear to be trying to copy with mixed success the figures of the silken "Gondar" curtains.



Fig. 15. On the right, the upper section of one of the figural panels of GW2 showing two abstract "angels" similar to those guarding the royal figure of BM1 and an interesting use of geometric patterns.

Fig. 16. Detail of GW2: distortions in the creation of human figures.

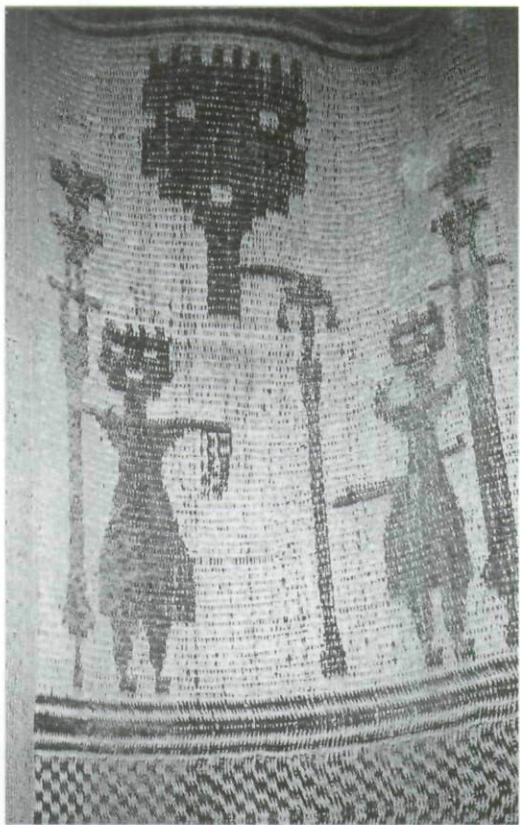
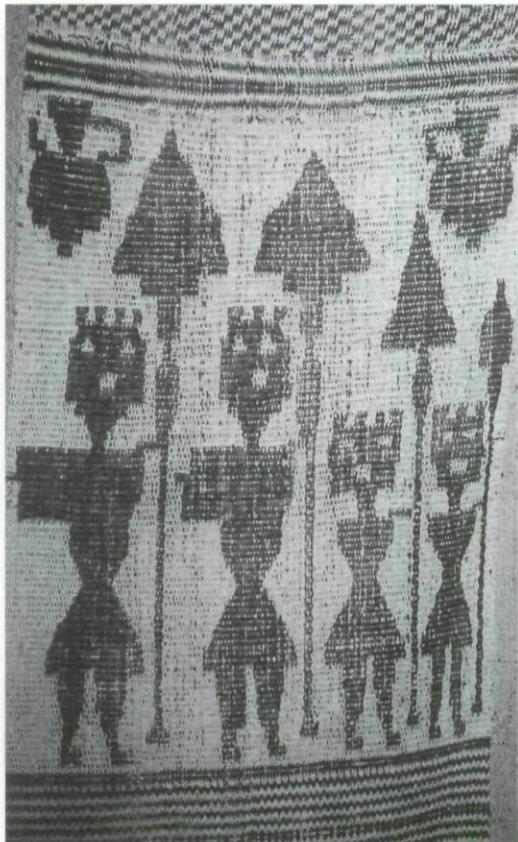


Fig. 17. Detail of GW2: spearbearer panel.



The cotton curtains of the monastery church of Abba Yohanni

During our second visit to St. Gabriel Wukien, we asked the head priest if he knew of any other church in the region that possessed curtains similar to those that hang in his church. He answered immediately that nearby Abba Yohanni had some, but they were not as complete as those in St. Gabriel Wukien. Within a few hours we had driven around the mountain and ascended the cliff-face into which the church of Abba Yohanni is carved. There we found two curtains, in poor condition but still hanging in place before the *maqdas* (figs. 19–21). Panels of plain-weave fabric had been hung on the suspension pole together with the tablet-woven brown and white panels. Some of these hung in front of the tablet weaving, and in some instances the plain-weave panel was sewn to the tablet-woven panel. As a result of this arrangement and the unusual height of the ceiling, the curtain panels were intertwined, obstructing visual examination. For a precise description, the hangings will have to be taken down and sorted to establish which panels originally were made to be joined together.

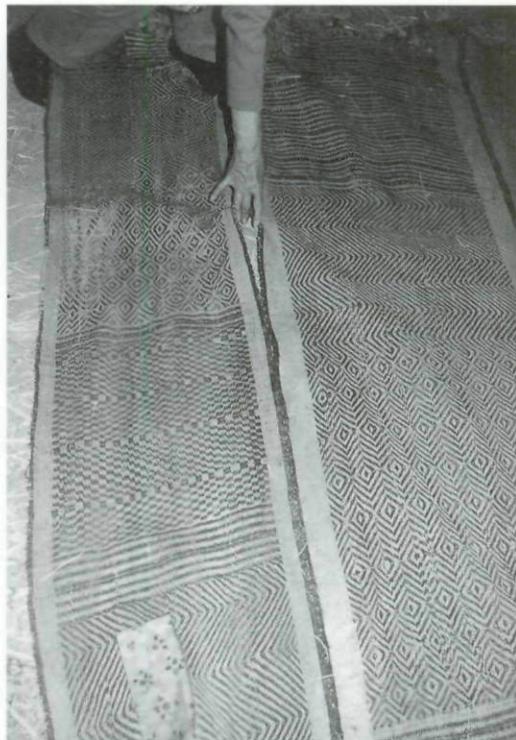


Fig. 18. Sections of three-paneled nonfigural curtain (GW3) being examined in the ambulatory of the church of St. Gabriel Wukien.

It was immediately apparent that these curtains, while they shared some elements with those of St. Gabriel Wukien and the "Gondar" examples, were in several ways quite different. The brown and white tablet-woven panels were of a finer, more tightly spun cotton yarn than those of St. Gabriel Wukien.¹⁹

One Abba Yohanni curtain (AY1) presently consists of a tablet-woven panel, about 22 cm wide, with a wider panel, about 40 cm wide, of identical vertically striped plain-weave fabric attached to each edge. The tablet-woven panel (fig. 19) is divided visually into at least six sections separated by several horizontal stripes. At the very top, a tiny portion of a stepped motif is barely visible. This is followed by a section of what seems to be zigzag patterning which is followed by an interesting design of stacked stepped motifs. The major feature of the panel is an undyed section with a well-executed arrangement of hand-crosses in brown. The assemblage features a central cross with a perforated diamond head atop a long straight staff which ends in a square base. Its staff is flanked on each side by a grouping of one medium-sized cross of the same type with four small crosses positioned above one another in pairs. Below the cross-filled register is another further block of zigzag patterning. It is possible to glimpse a corner of a lower register that may be part of an interlace cross like those in the more complete curtain, AY2.

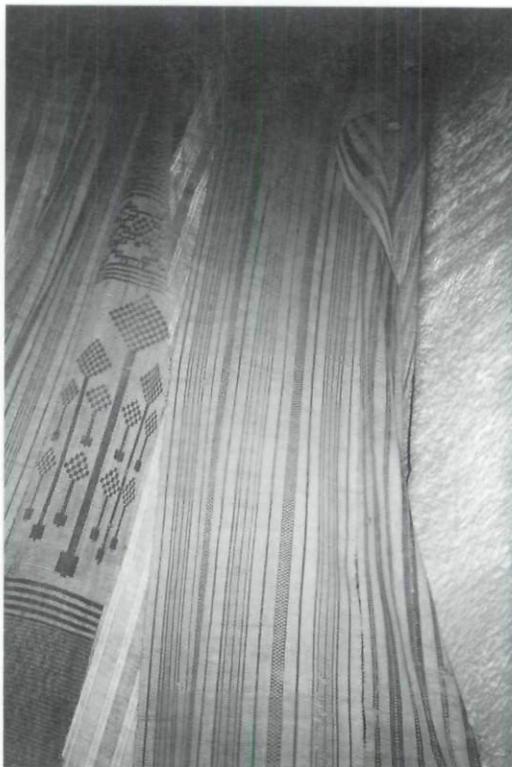


Fig. 19. View of a three-paneled curtain (AY1) in the church of Abba Yohanni, not far from St. Gabriel Wukien. A tablet-woven panel combined with two plain-weave panels may have replaced other tablet-woven pieces.

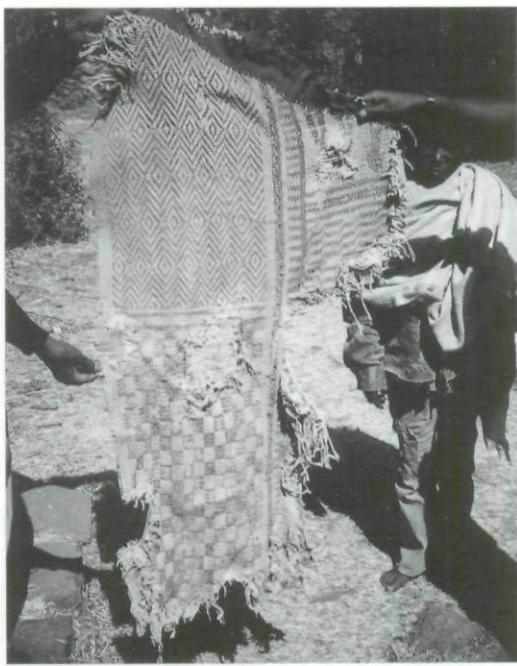


Fig. 20. The upper portion of a four-paneled curtain (AY2) in the church of Abba Yohanni. One panel of plain weave appears to have replaced, or been substituted for, a fourth tablet-woven panel. Not only are the interlace and geometric patterns very well executed here, but the cotton yarn is much finer and more tightly spun than that used in the curtains of St. Gabriel Wukien.



Fig. 21. Detail of AY2, lower portion of curtain shown in figure 20. Note the fine quality of the paintings on the adjacent wall, indicative of the past glory of this rock-hewn church carved from a sheer cliff face.

Fig. 22. Remnant of the tablet-woven curtains of the stone-built church of Koraro Maryam, central Tigray. The degraded quality of the weaving is seen in the very thick soft yarn of the frayed edges.



The second curtain (AY2) is made up of two full-length panels, one of tablet weaving and one of the vertical-striped plain-weave fabric flanked by two remnants of geometric-patterned tablet weaving (figs. 20, 21). The remnant to the left, approximately 1.5 meters long, features a large checkerboard design set between a long diamond-patterned section above and a wave pattern below. Panel two has the same vertically-banded plain-weave design as AY1. The third panel, tablet-woven, has a top register of geometric pattern set off by narrow horizontal bands from the main figural register. Here a natural-colored stepped diamond form with alternating dark and natural diamond shapes inside it stands out against a dark square. The next register, again set off by bands, features a large square filled by a finely executed, interlaced cross pattern against a natural ground (fig. 20). Below it is a large section of repeating stepped diamond patterns, with a cross in the center of each. Another well-executed interlace pattern fills the next register and is followed by a large section with the same stepped diamond pattern.

The fourth panel, a remnant of about one meter in length, has a short lattice-patterned section at the top, followed by a long panel of an all-over grid pattern of repeating cross shapes. Both the first and fourth panels appear to have been cut off rather than being worn out or torn.²⁰ Our informant could not provide any information about the origin of the curtains or their significance to his church.

The curtain panels in Koraro Maryam

As we followed a newly built highway from west to east across the Tembien of central Tigray, we planned to visit three churches new to us which, we were told, had unusual manuscripts that we might be able to photograph. The route is very scenic, passing through valleys and then ascending to *ambas*, or flat-topped mountains, surrounded by ranges of higher peaks. On top of one of these *ambas* we sighted the stone-built church of Koraro Maryam, an old church that had been completely rebuilt by its prosperous community in 1965–66 after a disastrous fire had destroyed the original building.²¹

The manuscripts, which the priests showed with great pride, were indeed interesting, dating from the second half of the seventeenth century. At our request, they brought out several discarded silk garments made “in the Turkish manner,” popular with Ethiopian nobility in the eighteenth century.

As we toured the new church building, I noticed a pile of nondescript cloths draped over a lectern. One of them proved to be the remnant of two curtain panels, tablet-woven of brown and white cotton yarn similar in thickness to that used in the curtains of St. Gabriel Wukien (fig. 22). Each panel was 37 cm wide, and one now measured 123 cm in length. Of the other, only about 35 cm remained. The longer piece is made up of two sections divided by horizontal stripes; one of overall concentric diamond patterning above a section of natural brown and white checkerboard design. On the plain ground of the smaller piece one can discern parts of three stick-like figures, which bring to mind the “angel” figures of BM1 and the uppermost section of GW2.

The oldest priest was pleased to answer questions about the curtains which he said he had seen complete and hanging across the *maqdas* as late as 1942–43, but they were so damaged by the later fire that they were discarded except for this piece. When we asked if he knew who made them, he unhesitatingly replied, “Seglin from Adwa.” He thought they were Ethiopian Christians but he wasn’t sure. As if to confirm our suspicion that this unusual textile was used in more places than we first thought, Memhir Gebre Meskal offered this: “They [the curtains] were brought to three churches at the same time—to Koraro Maryam and to one to the East and one to the West.” He gladly gave us the names of both churches, which we unfortunately did not have time to pursue on this journey.²²

Concluding Remarks

At this point in the investigation, one can say with certainty that for some undetermined reason and for an extended period of time, probably in the middle of the eighteenth century, an unidentified group of artisans in northern Ethiopia produced large, exceedingly complex woven curtains by the nontraditional tablet-weaving technique for several churches in the region between Gondar and Adwa. I have seen no examples of tablet weaving other than these curtains in any museum, market, church treasury, or in daily use. Various twining skills are used in basketry and net-making in Ethiopia, but there are no bands or other pieces of cloth made in the tablet-weaving technique.²³ Nor has any evidence turned up in archaeological excavations. Both the woven structure and designs needed to represent the iconographic message are complex. The structure required a large number of tablets (304 for each panel), which must have been carefully orchestrated. It is probable that royal personages commissioned the very expensive silken textiles. Perhaps they were intended to commemorate some significant occasion or were made as gifts to favored religious establishments. The curtains found in the Abba Gerima monastery church are clearly of the same quality as those in The British Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum. Since they have only two registers of figural design, they may have been part of an assemblage that featured a third curtain of more complex design, in the manner of the BM1 and ROM examples. The cotton hangings at St. Gabriel Wukien and elsewhere appear to be crude attempts to reproduce the complex figural patterning of the "Gondar" silk hangings (the ROM and BM panels). It is almost as if the designer or weavers had been shown the precisely woven silk panels by a patron of more modest means who wished to make an impressive gift to his local church. The weavers seem to have selected certain figures that they thought were within their competence and put them together in a random arrangement with no effort to depict an actual ceremonial occasion. For the present, we can only record their existence and await the discovery of other examples that may shed light on who wove these unusual textiles, and how and why they came to be woven.

Acknowledgments

The purpose of this article was to bring together all currently existing information about these unusual tablet-woven textiles from Ethiopia. The authors of the original article about the "Gondar curtains" published in *The Burlington Magazine*, Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, art historian and orientalist at Uppsala University, Sweden, and Michael Gervers, historian at the University of Toronto and research associate at the Royal Ontario Museum, gave their generous support and invaluable advice. Dr. Gervers also made available for citation the unpublished structural analyses by Mary Frame and Peter Collingwood, and dye analyses prepared by the Canadian Conservation Institute in Ottawa.

Peter Collingwood enthusiastically contributed his expert knowledge of tablet weaving wherever it may appear and patiently sorted out the nonweaving author's efforts at description. Paul Henze not only provided transport and photographic skill but shared his deep knowledge of Ethiopian culture and history. I would also like to thank the members of our research party—Stanislaw Chojnacki, Tafari Wossen, Tabotu Wolde-Mikael, Kebede Amare, and our assistant, Solomon Denboba—for their good company and patience, and all the anonymous Ethiopian monks and priests who graciously helped us record their prized possessions.

All photographs were taken by the author's husband, Paul Henze, between 1995 and 2000, unless otherwise credited.

About the Author

Martha Henze developed an interest in textiles while living abroad in Ethiopia from 1969 to 1972, and in Turkey from 1958 to 1959, and again from 1974 to 1977. During the past ten years, she has traveled extensively throughout Ethiopia with her husband, Paul Henze, often accompanied by Professor Stanislaw Chojnacki, a recognized authority on Ethiopian Art and a founder of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University. In four exploratory trips, she has undertaken a project to record and conserve historical textiles during which time she studied the tablet-woven curtains discussed here. She has also located several groups of Anatolian kilims and carpets dating from the late seventeenth to the early nineteenth century, found in churches in northern Ethiopia.

Notes

1. In 1864, the Ethiopian Emperor Tewodros II, feeling himself snubbed by Queen Victoria, had imprisoned the British consul in his fortress of Magdala. Over three succeeding years he seized several other Europeans and their families. Many books have been written about the British Expeditionary Force led by Sir Robert Napier to gain their release. A full account can be found in Bates (1979). Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers (1996) include a summary of the Magdala event as it relates to their study of the tablet-woven curtains brought from there.
2. Tablet weaving is a technique of combining warp and weft, characterized by the use of flat tablets, or cards, for the production of the shed. These tablets, usually square and made of some stiff material, carry the warp through holes punched in their four corners. Because all the tablets have to be gripped together by the weaver's hands, the technique has only rarely been used for textiles wider than a few centimeters, e.g., for narrow bands. As it requires only the tablets, a beater to force the weft into position, and some means of tensioning the warp, the technique has had a wide distribution from the sixth century onward, but mainly in northern Europe, the Middle East, and the Far East (Collingwood 1982).
3. The first article about the ROM curtain appeared in Gervers 1995, pp. 34–39. A fuller analysis of the British Museum and ROM curtains was published in Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers 1996, pp. 375–85.
4. A French scholar, M. Guy Annequin, reportedly photographed silken curtains at the monastery of Abba Gerima in the 1960s, but there is no trace of a written description or photograph taken at that time (personal communication, Michael Gervers 1999 and Jacques Mercier 2000).
5. Except for these hangings, tablet weaving is undocumented and unknown in Ethiopia. While there are many references to the popularity of silk garments among royal and religious figures in Ethiopia, there is no reference to the actual weaving of silk fabrics. From a very early period, foreign-made luxury goods were exchanged for exports of ivory, incense, gold, and slaves (Pankhurst 1968, pp. 256–67, 382–83; Pankhurst 1990). The authors of *North African Textiles* give a misleading impression of the incidence of silk weaving in Ethiopia based on the existence of the three examples of silken panels now in The British Museum and the Royal Ontario Museum (Spring and Hudson 1995, pp. 31, 38).
6. Paul Henze has studied Ethiopian history and culture for over thirty years and is the author of numerous articles on the subject. His most recent book, a comprehensive history of Ethiopia, is entitled *Layers of Time* (2000). Since 1991, he has traveled to remote regions to photograph manuscripts, wall paintings, and other treasures of Ethiopian Orthodox churches. These photographs will be added to the archive of the Ethnographic Museum and Art Gallery of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies (IES) at Addis Ababa University.
7. The measurements and warp count of the British Museum pieces cited are taken from the unpublished reports by Peter Collingwood (ms.). These vary slightly from the measurements available to Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers (1996).
8. Balicka-Witakowska and Gervers (1996, pp. 384–85) present a hypothesis that identifies the human figures as the Ethiopian King Bakaffa of Gondar, who reigned from 1721 to 1730, and his much longer-lived wife Empress Mentewab, who wore the crown as regent for their son, the third figure, until he ascended the throne with the name of Iyasu II. The authors present a clear case for this hypothesis by describing historical events and identifying objects such as crowns, style of dress, weaponry, and religious symbols with types customarily seen in Ethiopia at this period in Gondarene history.
9. These patterns require using two techniques of tablet weaving. The oblique stripes, zigzags, small diamonds, and cross-stripes are produced by turning all the tablets together in one direction with reversals at the pattern turn. To produce human figures, large checkerboards, and other small motifs, some of the tablets must be turned twice forward, then twice backward while the rest turn twice back, twice forward (Collingwood 1982, pp. 227–32). This produces a double-faced design with colors seen in reverse on the back. The resulting structure shows complementary sets of warp in 3-span floats in alternate alignment (Emery 1994, pp. 150–51).
10. See the section on Analyses of Dyes, p. 90.
11. See note 8 above.

12. This information is from notes taken by Paul Henze at the time of his interview with the monks of Abba Gerima, on February 21, 1995.

13. The full report of the structural analysis of the British Museum curtains completed by Peter Collingwood in late 1999 awaits publication by Gervers and Balicka-Witakowska.

14. Except for the eleven churches of Lalibela, said to have been carved at the beginning of the thirteenth century, and a few in Tigray, there is little evidence on which to base the age of these rock-hewn churches. Until the 1960s, few had even been recorded by foreigners. In the decades since, two hundred or more have been located, photographed, and described in the province of Tigray alone. Others have been found as far south as Addis Ababa in Shoa, though most of these are no longer being used. Lacking written records, scholars must rely on knowledge of the evolution of Christianity in other parts of the world and Ethiopia's own historical and artistic development to assign the foundation of these churches to a particular century.

15. In more recently built Ethiopian churches where the *maqdas* is a square central structure reaching the central peak of the roof, holy pictures are painted on its walls. Between services these are concealed by lightweight curtains of modern commercial fabric.

16. The church of St. Gabriel Wukien has a superb example of such a diamond-shaped cross in its treasury. Professor Stanislaw Chojnacki, director for many years of the museum and library of the Institute of Ethiopian Studies at Addis Ababa University, made many helpful suggestions regarding identification of the puzzling elements of the curtains of St. Gabriel Wukien. He is the author of *Major Themes in Ethiopian Paintings* (1983) and contributor to major publications on traditional and modern Ethiopian painting and ecclesiastical art objects.

17. As we departed, the priests gave me a small piece of the curtain that had been separated from one of these panels earlier. Peter Collingwood kindly examined the sample and confirmed that it was indeed double-faced tablet weaving, made of natural and brown-dyed cotton (see note 9 above).

18. Daniel of Wukien was originally from Shoa and moved north to Tigray to establish his own monastery in Tembien. Abba Daniel was "respected by King Zara Yakob," a fact which would establish the founding date of St. Gabriel Wukien in the first half of the fifteenth century (Kinefe-Rigb Zelleke 1975, p. 68).

19. Peter Collingwood studied the detail photographs and a small fragment of the Abba Yohanni pieces and confirmed that these curtains are also woven in both plain and double-faced tablet weaving techniques (see note 9 above) and are of unusually finely spun cotton.

20. Their appearance lends some credence to the tale told by the priest that during the Italian occupation (1930s) an officer had cut off the lower parts of the panels, saying he would replace them.

21. The Ethiopian Calendar date would be 1958, which is seven to eight years behind the Gregorian Calendar.

22. Our guide from the Tigray Tourism and Information Office in Mekelle offered to make these journeys at his first opportunity.

23. See note 5 above.

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